

Pathways to proficiency: Describing the language skills and learning processes of adult learners of Scottish Gaelic.

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Oilthigh
Ghlaschu



Outline

- How we learn languages
- How we measure proficiency in languages
- Gaelic in its social context
- Gaelic language learning and its importance
- Frameworks for learning and proficiency scales
- The current study

Theories of second language learning

- Usage-based
 - Exposure to the language and repetition
- Focus on forms
- Cognitive processes involved
 - Noticing (Schmidt 1995)
 - Entrenchment of words and structures (Goldberg 2003)
 - Automaticity and proceduralisation of knowledge (Segalowitz 2000)
 - The 'one-clause-at-a-time' hypothesis (Pawley & Syder 2000)

How do we measure and explain proficiency

- Communicative competence (Canale & Swain 1980)
 - Grammar
 - Lexicon
 - Pragmatics
- Communicative Language Ability (Bachman 1990)
 - How effectively are we able to use the language we already know to achieve our goals?

How do we measure and explain proficiency?

- Focus on linguistic development in terms of Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency
 - i.e. What language do we know, and how quickly can we get at it?
 - Trade-offs between these measures particularly at lower levels of proficiency (Robinson 2001, Ortega 2003, Skehan 2007, de Jong et al. 2012)

Gaelic in its social context

- In a state of serious decline since 18th century
- 14,531 speakers (Census 2011) \approx 1.13%
- Slow in the decline of speaker numbers, in part attributed to increase in learners, especially at school level

Gaelic in its social context

- Positive developments:
 - UK ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 2001
 - Increased presence in media and education
 - Gaelic Medium Education
 - University of the Highlands and Islands
 - Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (SMO)
 - BBC Alba

Gaelic in its social context

- National Plans for Gaelic (2007-2012; 2012-2017)
 - Key areas:
 - » Acquisition
 - » Usage
 - » Status
 - » Corpus
 - “a blueprint for stabilising and then ultimately increasing the number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland.” (BnG 2007: 9)
 - “secure an increase in the number of people learning, speaking and using Gaelic in Scotland” (BnG 2012: 4)

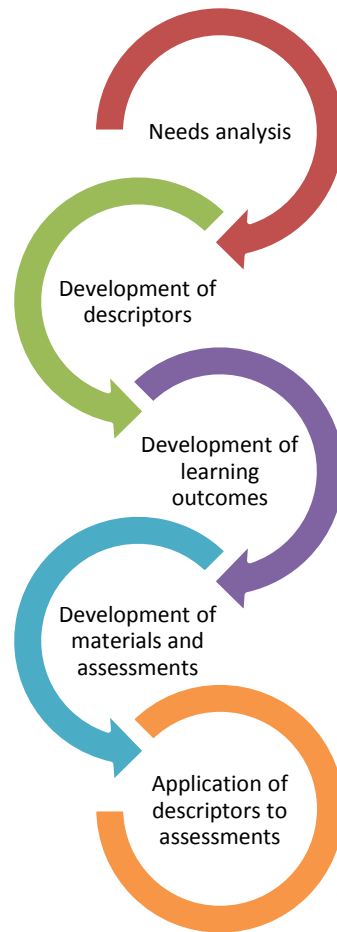
The learning of Gaelic by adults

- Fishman 1991; Strubell 1998
- At least 350 adult learners in Glasgow (Milligan et al. 2011), ~2000 altogether (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2012)
- Adult learners are “vital for the future of Gaelic in Scotland” (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2012: 26)

The learning of Gaelic by adults

- “adult learners of Gaelic have a great potential to contribute to reversing language shift (but) this potential is not being fulfilled at present” (MacCaluim, 2007: 232)
- “fragmented, patchy, uncoordinated, poorly promoted, inadequately funded and often lacking in professional rigour” (McLeod et al., 2010: 54)
- In Glasgow, tutor quality, student placement, and learning continuums could still be improved (Milligan et al. 2011)

Pedagogic cycles in second language learning



Language learning frameworks and proficiency scales

- Proficiency scales to address formal **and** functional linguistic features
 - McNamara 1990; JHAL de Jong & Van Ginkel 1992; SLATE; Bartning et al. 2010; N de Jong et al. 2012
- Importance of expert intuitions **and** empirical research (Fulcher 2004; Taylor & Barker 2008; Osborne 2011)

Proficiency scales

- Current resources for Gaelic:
 - *Sgèile sgilean cànanain luchd-ionnsachaidh*
(‘Leaners’ skills scale’ – Munro et al. 2012)
 - Ùlpan
 - Scottish Qualifications Authority
 - *An Comunn Gàidhealach*

The current study

- What formal linguistic features are observable at different levels of communicative ability?
- Design:
 - Semi-structured interviews
 - 16 adult learners of Gaelic
 - 9 women, 7 men
 - Different learning backgrounds
 - Different amounts of exposure to Gaelic

Linguistic proficiency

- 8 measures of proficiency, in 3 categories:
 - **Complexity**
 - Percentage of complex utterances produced:
 - Lexical diversity – D
 - MLC

Linguistic proficiency

– Accuracy

- Average number of errors per AS-unit
- Percentage of error-free AS-units

– Fluency

- Phonation Time Ratio
- Mean Length of Run
- Pruned Words per Minute

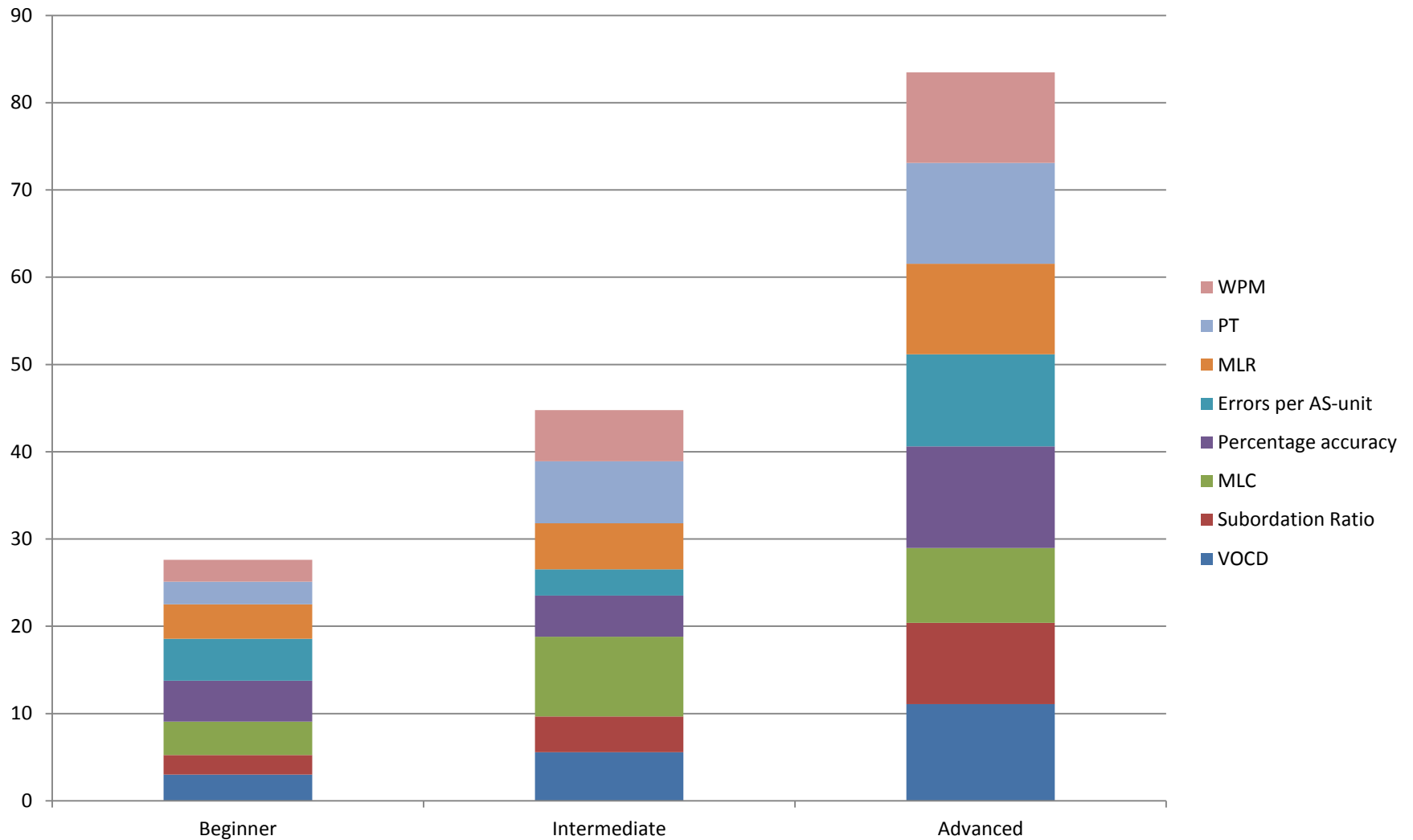
Communicative adequacy

- 5 non-professional raters heard a five minute sample from each interview
- Provided with a communicative ability scale developed for the task
- Speakers classed as “Level A” (Beginner), “B” (Intermediate), “C” (Advanced)

Results

- 6 Beginners, 6 Intermediates, 4 Advanced
- High inter-rater reliability ($\alpha = .961$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .921-.985)

Results



Why are we seeing these results?

- Background questionnaire and semi-structured interview:
 - Learning background
 - Learning strategies
 - Affective variables

Why are we seeing these results?

- Learning background:
 - Length of time learning Gaelic
 - Immersion
 - Living in Western Isles
 - Attending a Gaelic-medium course
 - Experience of exams
 - Course type
 - Speaking our Language, Ùlpan, SMO short course, SMO distance learning, SMO Cùrsa Comais, Once weekly course, Other

Why are we seeing these results?

- Learning strategies:
 - Cognitive
 - Rehearsal
 - Practice with other speakers
 - TV and radio
 - Reading
 - Inferencing
 - Deduction
 - Pattern recognition

Why are we seeing these results?

- Learning strategies:
 - Metacognitive
 - Selective attention
 - Monitoring
 - Evaluating
 - Social strategies
 - Asking for clarification
 - Seeking peer support

Why are we seeing these results?

- 3*2 or 3*3 Fisher's exact tests to establish association between individual characteristics and affective variables, and proficiency results
 - Top, bottom, and middle thirds of scores for proficiency dimensions cross-tabulated with experience or not of a given learning environment, or strategy
 - Significance: $p < 0.10$

Why are we seeing these results?

- Positive relationships between....

Learning background	Dimension of proficiency
Immersion in the Western Isles	WPM
A course using <i>Speaking our Language</i>	SR
SMO Short Course	PT
An Cùrsa Inntrigidh	MLR
An Cùrsa Comais	SR
Private classes	WPM
Gaelic-medium course	vocd MLC Accuracy Errors per AS-unit

Why are we seeing these results?

- Positive relationships between....

Learning Strategy	Dimension of proficiency
Practise with native speakers	vocd SR Number of Errors per AS-unit WPM Communicative Adequacy
Reading	vocd Accuracy Number of Errors per AS-unit MLR PT
Deducing grammatical rules	vocd SR Number of Errors per AS-unit WPM

Why are we seeing these results?

- Positive relationships between....

Affective variable	Dimension of proficiency
Preparedness to take risks	vocd
Feeling confident Self-rated speaking skills Self-rated interaction skills	vocd SR Accuracy Number of Errors per AS-unit MLR PT WPM Communicative Adequacy
Self-rated listening skills	Accuracy Number of Errors per AS-unit

Why are we seeing these results?

- Practise with native speakers is the strategy related to higher scores for a number of dimensions of proficiency
- Doing a Gaelic-medium course is also related to higher scores for a number of dimensions of proficiency
- Feeling confident and scoring higher are related
- Strong correlations between final outcome and self-assessment
 - High self-awareness

Conclusion

- The communicative ability scale is:
 1. Reliable and valid for the purposes of this study
 2. Can be expanded to include detailed descriptors of language in terms of complexity, accuracy, fluency, and lexis
- These descriptors can be used in a proficiency scale serving the basis of a framework
- Quantifying complexity, accuracy, and fluency gives those using the scale a more solid base for evaluating proficiency

Conclusion

- The important individual differences mentioned contribute to processes such as noticing and proceduralisation
- Learners should be encouraged to be aware of their own strengths and weaknesses
- Learners should be introduced to learning strategies and the nature of different courses

Conclusion

- Very small sample
- Results are based on one particular task
 - Very strong implications for lexical results
- Schematic trigrams and 4-grams?
- Can teachers and learners actually use the scale? (Hirai & Koizumi 2013 – multiple-trait scale)

Mòran taing!